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ABSTRACT

Oral history can contribute to social education in a number of ways. Traditionally, data collection has been considered as providing the most benefits to students of oral history. These benefits have derived from the facts that: (1) historical knowledge is immediate and tangible, (2) oral history stimulates students' interests, (3) students interact with diverse groups of people within the community, and (4) students improve their skills in planning and interpersonal communication. In this paper the authors emphasize that additional benefits result from the method and content of data collection. First, oral history promotes ego development in students by providing them with opportunities for social interaction. It also encourages development of empathy and moral sensitivity as students learn to appreciate other peoples' situations, lifestyles, and values. Finally, through sharing and involvement, oral history promotes a sense of community building. These experiences are especially beneficial for adolescents in terms of their social development. (AV)

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BEYOND COLLECTING INFORMATION:

ORAL HISTORY AS SOCIAL EDUCATION

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> As soon as our young can comprehend our words we begin to tell them stories, and the hope we harbor for our elders is that we will be able to hear their full story before they go . . . . (Cox, 1973)

Storytelling is slowly finding its way into classrooms wearing the label of "oral history" or simply "people remembering their past". The increasingly popular response to the works of Allan Anderson (1977), Barry Broadfoot (1973, 1976, 1977), Rick Butler (1978), Myrna Kostash (1977), and Studs Terkel (1968, 1970, 1972) established the fact that readers are interested in "people's history" and find it meaningful as well as entertaining. Historian's guilds found a place for the new tool as did new associations.[1] The new researchers produced guides for others to practice the craft and contribute to the budding collections of taped interviews in local and national archives (Baum, 1974; McCracken, 1974). Professionals and amateurs went forth to gather reminiscences for posterity.

In the late 1960's, Eliot Wigginton (1972-1976) was working with school children in Rabun Gap, Georgia in order to gather the stories and craftways of their elders. They published a community newsletter which became the basis for a series of Foxfire volumes which have attracted thousands of readers in North America. Similar efforts elsewhere resulted in the collection of traditional creation stories and legends from school children of native Canadians in the Vancouver area of British Columbia.

Some Advantages

History and social science teachers, wrestling with ways to make their courses more interesting, found oral history techniques advantageous in at least four ways:

- historical knowledge is immediate and tangible. One has the sense of "doing" history and providing motivation for inquiry and research skills;
- oral history offers direct linkage to "new" historical interests which students tend to take seriously, e.g., ethnic traditions, family histories, and women's history;
- school studies are linked to the experiences of the community, and tend to produce outcomes which are valued in the adult world; the students get to interact with diverse groups of people, thus breaking down social isolation in the school curriculum; projects foster useful interactions with parents, relatives, and neighbors;
- students improve skills in planning and organization, oral interviewing or questioning, interpersonal communications, and listening with empathy (Eric-Chess, 1975, pp. 1-4).

But the fascination with oral history, perhaps in too many classrooms, is restricted by the focus on data collection about local phenomena and by a view of education as knowing information. The emphasis should be on method which includes "planned-in-advance, taped-recorded interviews with someone who has first hand knowledge of an event or a way of life that's of some historical interest. It is not random conversation tape-recorded" (Eric-Chess, 1975, p.1).

The educational merits of the method are not to be restricted to the activity of data collection but are essentially located in what students and teachers do with the data. Indeed, it is no easy task in executing the method as Anderson (p. xiv) reminds us: "Interviewing is an art, and I have been at it for thirty years, and have learned my trade. You have to draw people out, you have to stir up their memories, you have to provoke them and charm them, you have to bully them or be patient and kind to them or humour them along, depending on circumstances, but in most cases, interviewed properly, people are simply busting to tell their stories." But apart from the technique, what is there about the essential nature of oral history that contributes to social education in any significant manner?

Oral History and the Quest for Identity

Oral history contributes specifically to that frequently mentioned "identity crisis" in adolescent development. Data or facts offered to youth by the traditional educator largely ignore the quest for identity. The innovations of the "new" social studies seem as alien to the development of identity as the traditional history and social sciences which they sought to replace.

Values clarification might assist youth in articulating feelings and concerns, but not aid in the resolution or satisfaction of those concerns (Fraenkel, 1977). Affective education has not resolved the problems of narcissism[2] and privatism. Moral reasoning if it be focussed solely upon value principles and rational individualism, ignores the issues of moral behaviour.

We know that identities are attained as a function of social interaction. Patterns of interactions within and without social institutions as expressed in oral history can foster positive identities among adolescents and build commitment to civic ideals. If one cannot define oneself successfully in a milieu of inadequate symbolism (Klapp, 1969), there is an "identity crisis". The predominance of such crises among youth and adults results in such characteristics as fadism, the worship of the new (neophilia), and the search for instantaneous satisfaction (Halleck, 1969). Social interactions may assist in supplying a more adequate symbolism in such creations as the social sentiments of loyalty, fraternity, and community solidarity. Stories from the linguistic and moral community tell us about these social interactions which then shape the learner's perceptions and actions.

Oral history can provide "meanings" both about the "ego-order" (finding meaning which integrates personal experiences) and about "social-order" (the meaning maintained by persons sharing a geographical or historical setting). These two sides of identity (Erikson, 1976) were less ambiguous when a single world view was prevalent and reinforced by the social interactions of the community. The accounts of the pioneers and early immigrants reveal the homegeneity of perspectives and interpretations of their experiences, e.g., in religious norms and the role of women. The symbols, images, and perspectives offered in the narratives were often integrated as sacred and absolute. These systems of meaning contained images of the course of life and how one comes to terms with life's ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes (Erikson, 1976, p. 19).

Shattering the Canopy

The once-revered identity under the "sacred canopy" (Berger, 1970) underwent erosion and shattering with the evolution of the urban-industrial society so typical in North America. Now competing images, symbol systems, and world views provide greater dissonance. Reality as "one", consensually validated by the "facts" of existence for those likeminded people in the community, has given way to a world of diverse symbols, multiplicity, and pluralism which is much more uncomfortable. There is no return to that older world vision of tightly-knit ghettos with the identical symbols of another age. The challenge is in creating legitimate, meaningful identities for ourselves and our children in culturally diverse settings. This is a forward perspective to finding out who we are and where we are by creating legitimate, meaningful identities for ourselves. Thus, discussions of national identities, ethnicity, citizenship, and moral or values education reveal an abiding interest in building new bonds for communal life in a pluralistic society and in safeguarding students from banality, alienation, and a life based upon the elusive quest for "style".

Recent research and reflection upon adolescent development are helpful in discerning the features of a legitimate identity and the process of its attainment. Underlying adolescents' immediate fads and behavioural styles are deep and persistent concerns about identity and place. Whether these concerns are conceptualized as — self-image, disconnectedness, and control over one's life (Fantini and Weinstein, 1970)[3], or as a sense of: competency, usefulness

(achievement), belongingness (affiliation), power (potency), responsibility (dignity), and challenge - the task of possessing such senses is accomplished only with others in a real community which has a fraternal feeling of shared values. They cannot be solely individual accomplishments for the senses are symbolic and institutional.

Developmental psychology has also complemented this perspective by informing us that any progress through structures (stages) of development depends greatly upon the type and quality of interactions with one's environment. Adolescents can conceive of various courses of action and what might be the consequences for any one course. They can think abstractly about themselves and can project themselves into the future. They can empathize with others once they have acquired some skills through strategies learned at home, in the community, and in school (Sprinthall and Mosher, 1976, 1978). Research on ego-development indicates that adolescents also show intensive concern for others in the context of personal responsibility. They can understand complex human motives and possess an enlarged social perspective (Loevinger, 1970, 1974).

Social educators are increasingly aware of developmental moral theory. If one appeals to the Kohlberg framework, adolescents are classified as predominantly at the stage three orientation of fulfilling the expectations of others in moral reasoning. They are moving toward the stage four orientation which is to reason according to

the established norms of the social order and authority.

Adolescents will reason more adequately if:

- they are exposed to enriching experiences in the classroom, dealing with problems of the human condition by means of moral dilemmas, reasoning, and acting;
- they interact with others who are at least at one stage higher in their moral reasoning.

It is clear that ego-development, moral development, empathy and identity development are socially derived by individuals through their experiences and interactions with others.[4] But, just as values clarification and "humanistic education", have focussed upon self to the exclusion of the social context, so some developmentalists direct us and define our development in ways that close our options and are not pluralistic interpretations of reality. Public education, which has just shed some of its "melting pot" bias in terms of social customs, ought not to reinstate cultural homogenization in the subtle expectations of how students should think, value, and define themselves (Beck, 1973; Novak, 1974; Sullivan, 1977; Gilligan, 1977).

Symbolic Worlds and Pluralism

"Religious Group Protects Bugs" headlined a report (Waterloo-Kitchener Record, July 22, 1976, p. 44) about a conflict between a Jain living in Toronto and public health officers who came to the apartment to "exterminate" cockroaches. The Jain, an immigrant from India now working as a mechanical engineer, protested such "violence" that would be perpetrated on the roaches. The health officers were

astounded. Two symbol systems stood in conflict. These may operate at different levels of consciousness, e.g., the following four (Novak, 1974; Edleman, 1969; Lasswell, 1958):

- A sense of reality: the worldview which serves as a selective screen containing what is truly important; the set of symbols which function to give life meaning and self-identity. One feels the differences in the sense of the "realitites" when confronted with culture shock abroad or Jains in an apartment in Toronto.

- A cultural and personal story: the dramatic structures given to time, history, space, and interpersonal relations by cultural symbols and the personal experience of persons within those collectives. One can see this when comparing a Winslow Homer painting of man and the sea with a Taoist conception of the same phenomenon, or the rituals of the Inuit and those of the Florida hunter, or the conception of violence for the health officer and the Jain.

- A network of images and words: interpreted in the context in which we place them and often of a mixed and contradictory nature. Witness the debates over busing, bilingualism, immigration policy, or the image of "progress" as held by the ecologist and the corporate executive. One person's "myth" is another's "truth"; one's "ideology" is another's "rationality". This network shapes our hopes and directs our lives and expectations.

- A set of rules for interpreting events, images and words: flexible processes which focus our attention and trigger responses, such as the claim of a woman's total right over her body becoming murder for others in the abortion debate, or the above cockroach story.

In the social sciences there are other classifications of meaning systems (Kluckholm, 1950, 1961) which converge to suggest that the various symbolic world and networks are primarily communal, social, and historical. To understand ourselves and others involves or demands insightful self-reflection and "passing-over" to others' cultural horizons and ways of living. Meaningful use of oral history can assist in this task. The public health officer should have been equipped to realize that his response to the bugs was not the absolute and universal one possible. The Jain, on the other hand, was already participating in two symbolic worlds -- that of a Jain and all that his religion implied and that of a mechanical engineer living in a vast pluralistic and cosmopolitan society. Analogies could also be made to the Navaho child living in a village of his elders and watching television and going to a public school, or the Inuit who follows some of the customs of his elders and also participates in the economic life of his anglo or francophone neighbors.

Thus, the development of a "pluralistic personality" is imperative for adolescents and adults alike. Such persons will have the self-awareness to confront various symbolic worlds, the stories which created them, and their implications for social interaction. They will have an empathetic disposition to "pass over" into the symbolic lives of others (Bruner, 1970). Once they have done this, they will be in a better position to work collectively on the ground rules for cooperation and the resolution of problems in pluralistic communities. For example, the community worker in a neighborhood

does not try to build a community around sameness in the interpretations and experiences of their lives, but upon common concerns and the dignity of difference of meanings.[5]

One final point in the rationale for the use of oral history should be made. The method can develop much needed skills and attitudes that lead to altruism, cooperation and social responsibility. Ideologically individualistic models of social relationships must be replaced by more communal or collective ones. A moral commitment or a sense of moral and social passion that is deeply felt and that permeates one's sense of self-identity and self-esteem can be promoted in the classroom in an atmosphere of warmth, acceptance and caring (Cagan, 1978).

Adolescents, Pluralistic Personalities and Oral History

We have been arguing a rationale for the nature of oral history as a student's tool to discern answers — albeit tentative ones — to the questions, "who are we and how should we live together?: It is not primarily a means of gathering information or piling up heaps of knowledge, i.e., facts.

In his best-selling oral history, Working, Studs Terkel travelled into communities and sampled the diversity of images and "realities" of working in the United States. People spoke to dreams, dignity, diligence, and frustrations. The impact on the interviewer and the reader is much more than simple stories of workers. It is a panorama of meanings of work and it evokes empathy for such workers in their situations. The same can be said for Anderson's accounts of farmers and ranchers, of Broadboot's pioneers of

Western Canada, of Kostash's Ukrainian Canadians, or of Butler's Quebecers. Students can replicate - perhaps in a much less sophisticated way - these studies in their own communities with parents, relatives, neighbours and friends.

To capture those stories orally and transfer them to print is no mean task. It first has to come out of a conviction that dramatic, wonderful, terrible, foolish, funny and tragic things happen to many people as an inevitable human condition. Or it might come from a certain serendipity, an unexpected excitement and revelation of the interviewee. It is not only the elderly who have lived so much more of these remembered experiences that has formed an audience for the oral historians. It is also children who might reveal their perceptions of a diety, heroes, or even human reproduction (Bernstein, 1978).

Ved Mehta (1976) returned to India to recover the essential Gandhi and to examine what has happened to his ideals and followers. Mehta tracked down Gandhi's supporters and apostles, interviewed them, and examined their lifestyles in the light of old ideals. Students can also investigate similar ideals, and vision, of significant others of recent generations. Every community has its characters, its leaders, its models, and its legends.

In her famous documentary film, Harlan County, USA, Barbara Kopple focusses upon "lived moments" in the lives of coal miners and their families, strike breakers, and executives. The human pathos of underground mining, conflict and marginality

stood in contrast to the sense of community among United Mine Workers and the intense love among family members. Kopple's film helps us make meaning of life where it is lived — in moments.

Why Shoot the Teacher? comes to mind as a Canadian film that vividly describes the plight of a teacher in the prairie country in the 1930s as seen through the eyes of its author, Max Braithwaite. Likewise, the oral stories of the Broadfoot collection have been extended visually in a magnificent thirteen-part television series, based on The Pioneer Years, and produced by ACCESS Alberta in 1977.

Whether it is a bush pilot making a wintry run, the West Indian boarding a plane for a new life in Toronto, the auto-worker facing his first strike, or the first recollection of drought by an old woman, once a youngster on an Alberta prairie (Rasmussen, Savage and Wheeler, 1976), each has a meaning or several meanings to share. "It is not by looking at things but by dwelling in them that we understand their . . . . meaning" (Polyani, 1966).

Roswell Angier (1976) spent three years dwelling in Boston's infamous Combat Zone taking pictures and interviewing bouncers, bartenders, patrons and show girls. He asked questions about the quality of life and the worth of various life styles. Students can also ask such questions in their communities. Courage, cowardice, generosity and greed, awe and mockery are human qualities which can be shared, discerned, and reflected upon. No "laws" or empirical generalizations result but rather insightful propositions and images of self and others which might serve as students' guides.

Leo Sandon, Jr. (1978) interviewed North American "Moonies" (Unification Church members) in order to understand the message and motives of the organization and its youthful adherents. Michael Maccoby (1976) spent six years studying hundreds of executives in North American corporations. His interviews and "in-dwelling" revealed certain behavioural styles and compulsions linked to value systems and personal stories. Value concepts and symbols which prevade our acts and decisions are more readily revealed through stories. Questions about worth, importance, priority and significance can promote the expansion of the story-telling into the value-ladened realm. Care must be taken not to invade the deeper privacy of the interviewee.

Teacher educators can look at the edited volume by Milgram and Sciarra (1974) for a model of how autobiographical accounts of certain facets of growing up can be richly interpreted. Concepts of aggression, fear and anxiety, awareness of ethnicity, race, poverty and joy, feelings of guilt, awe, trust, and integrity are available to those "doing" oral history. Concentration must be focussed on the "other", i.e., the interviewee, and then back to the self and one's wrold view.

Two very recent examples of the technique are: Bill Finger's interview of Carlyle Marney in "Preaching the Gospel, South of God," Christian Century (Oct. 4, 1978), and Studs Terkel's interview of the founder of the Gray Panthers on film or videotape, "Maggie Kuhn: Wrinkled Radical," (WNET/13).

An extraordinary resource is available on microfilm (microfilming Corporation of America) of 42 collections (2,900 + memoirs) in The New York Times Oral History Program. This collection includes a comprehensive inventory of the arts, business, labor, religion, education, medicine, ethnicity, coal mining, poverty, civil rights and other specific issues.

Implications

It is not the intention of this article to elaborate as extensively on the educational implications as on the rationale for doing oral history. Willa Baum and Jane McCracken (1974), and Joseph Cash et al. (1975) have done us considerable service in the "how to do it" manner. It has been argued that oral history as information gathering is limited in value. More important, oral history can link to fundamental sources of adolescent development and provide significant experiences for growth. Its major impact may be found in:

Identity: ego-development

Empathy: limited feeling of others' situations

Moral Sensitivity: ability to "pass over", transcent

Community Building: sharing and involvement, models

The classroom teacher will want to be attentive to the typical phases of planning -- application -- debriefing. In the planning phase, the students will need to define their immediate objectives, their specific audience and the types of questions that will be used in the interviews. They will want some initial feedback from leaders in the community about the sensitivities involved or about the persons to be interviewed or actually identified for interviews. They will be

cautious about managing time so that neither interviewee or interviewer wastes opportunities with poorly structured questions or ones that probe too personally. They will have to have the appropriate equipment (tape recorder) and be prepared to use much more footage than will be transferred to the written accounts.

In the application or execution phase, students can enhance their decision-making skills (Meyer, 1978) by preparing and asking in a sensitive and appropriate fashion the following kinds of questions (Chauncy, 1970):

- Who are you and what background are you coming from? (identity and ego questions)
- What are my/your motives and intentions and what do you think theirs were?
- How do I/we/you see what is going on here? How do these interactions of people determine or affect their decisions and actions? (empathetic and interpretrive questions)
- What do I/we/they stand for in that situations(s)? What are the value propositions and principles which justify their decision of action? (Moral sensitivity questions)
- What do I/we/they/you live for in life? In community? In this neighbourhood? (community building with others)

In the debriefing phase there are tasts of analyzing the collections of oral history, comparing items and perspectives with interviews from the field, transfering the data from oral to written format with some structuring, identifying the key elements and finding patterns and differences in life styles, questioning values and the contexts in which

these operated, applying relevant questions to one's own skills, situations, and future directions. An assessment procedure could also be developed for assessing the development of techniques and competencies such as decision-making, interviewing, interpreting, and reporting. The very important competency of empathy or "passing over" could also be partially measured from responses and self-reports.

The vehicle of oral history provides no guarantee for radical social change but it is one of many means that social educators might do well to promote.[6] The socialization process will be enriched with an emphasis on positive and meaningful pluralism and with the development of a skill that assists in understanding others and in sharing in the development of those common affectations and standards which make life together possible, civil and even delightful.

Notes

1. A number of national, provincial, and state associations of oral history have emerged in recent years: The Canadian Oral History Association, Box 301, Station A. Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 8V3; Oral History Society, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, C04 3SQ, England; Oral History Association, North Texas State University, P. O. Box 13734 NTSU Station, Denton, Texas, U.S.A., 76203; and The Aural History Institute of British Columbia, 40 Provincial Archives, Parliament Building, Victoria, B. C., V8V 1X4.
2. A number of popular news magazines have identified narcissism as the principal neurosis of North America and North Americans, e.g., Otto Kernberg, interviewed by Linda Wolfe, "Why Some People Can't Love", Psychology Today (June, 1978) pp. 55-59; George Woodcock, "The Mirror of Narcissus", Saturday Night (September, 1978) pp. 27-29.
3. While Fantini and Weinstein identify student concerns they perceive them as focussed upon student "self-development", i.e., the educational strategies suggested are directed to what we perceive as self-absorption and naive individualism, without regard for the depth of social sentiments and symbols in which such concerns are truly satisfied.

4. One of the most recent efforts reported is that of the Harvard team of McClelland, Constantian, Regalado and Stone, which found that maturity levels in some young adults is highly dependent upon the quality of the adult-child relationships rather than the quantity among other things. Cf. "Making it to Maturity", Psychology Today (June, 1978) pp. 42-52f.
5. There is a conflict of interpretations for those who view the pluralistic personality as ethically relative and those who find it most universal and compatible with such ethical principles as those espoused by Gert (1973). Here Novak (1974) and Kehoe (1977) would represent champions of the conflict.
6. The most recent history guidelines, History: Intermediate Division, 1977, for Ontario's 7-10th grades contain various references to oral history but usually under another lable such as "investigative activities". One of the support documents, No. 2, Canada's Multicultural Heritage, suggests under "approach B" that: "The emphasis in this unit is on individual student research and the sharing of cultural experiences. Students will interview men and women in the community, interpret records, and analyze documents in the process of examining the cultural character of life of the community" (p.5).

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